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Slippery Slope

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A Slippery Slope

Dumping grease and food leftovers down the kitchen sink may be a quick clean-up solution, but the accumulated effects could cause major headaches for homeowners. The TCEQ has suggestions on how to prevent the dreaded problem of sewer backup.

Grease and food leftovers can conspire to become a homeowner's worst nightmare

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Spring ushers in the season for backyard barbecues and cookouts. Fried chicken, potato salad, and coleslaw are hallmarks of warm weather gatherings. And don't forget the ice cream.

Enjoy the feasts, but just hope that the remains of past kitchen cleanups don't make a sudden, stinky appearance. That can happen when fats, oils, and grease have been dumped down the kitchen sink.

Discarded substances like cooking oils, mayonnaise, and meat scraps can stagnate in underground plumbing lines, gathering mass when joined by bread and other absorbent food scraps, until one day the sewer system becomes blocked and a backup occurs inside the home. This can lead to expensive plumbing repairs and even replacing flooring and walls.

"Sure we all enjoy a leisurely Sunday breakfast of fried eggs and bacon. But when you're done, think about whether it's a good idea to scrape your plate into the kitchen sink. Even if you have a garbage disposal, consider placing leftovers directly into the garbage pail," suggests Celeste Hoehne, a compliance assistance specialist with the TCEQ.

Once in the pipes, those leftovers start to coagulate, Hoehne explained, and that's the beginning of a grease blockage.

While restaurants and commercial establishments must install grease traps or interceptors and have them cleaned regularly, no such requirements exist for homes or apartments. So it's up to each individual to consider using proper disposal of food waste.

Most sewer backups occur between the house and the city's sewer main, meaning the property owner is responsible for correcting the problem. Grease can also form blockages in the main lines. This creates sanitary sewer overflows, which can pollute nearby lakes and streams and create a health threat for people and wildlife.

Not only is it better to keep sinks and toilets off limits when disposing of greasy items, but storm sewer drains and the backyard are not good options either. Many storm drains lead directly to streams and creeks, so discarded grease would pollute the nearest water source. Any substance poured onto the ground could end up in groundwater.

The TCEQ suggests that small amounts of used cooking oil be reused, then poured into a container and thrown away. For large amounts of used oil, try to reuse or recycle. Check the phone book for "recyclers" or "rendering companies." Another option is to slowly mix in kitty litter until all the oil is absorbed and can be placed in a garbage bag.

The TCEQ has posters and instructional videos that contain helpful hints for managing food waste. For more information, call the agency at 1-800-447-2827.

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Ideas for Disposal of Grease and Leftovers

- Put grease and used cooking oils in covered collection containers. Let them solidify on the counter or in the refrigerator, then place in the garbage.
- Scrape food scraps into trash cans or garbage bags; avoid using the garbage disposal. Nonmeat and dairy food items may be placed in a compost pile.
- Remove oil and grease from dishes, pans, and griddles by using a rubber spatula or paper towel to scrape or wipe off excess grease.
- Prewash greasy dishes and pans with cold water--not hot--before going into the dishwasher.
- Don't pour cooking oil and grease down the drain.
- Don't put food scraps down the drain.

- Don't run hot water over dishes, pans, fryers, or griddles to wash oil and grease down the drain.
- Don't flush food scraps down the toilet.

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